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Gathering Place

James R. "Duke" Aiona Jr.

Tuesday, March 22, 2005

We have responsibility to ban alcohol on campus

University of Hawaii associate professor Amarjit Singh contends that banning alcohol on campus will have little or no effect on underage drinking ("Gathering Place," March 8). I respectfully disagree.

Addressing this social problem requires a comprehensive and balanced approach involving a shared commitment from youth, parents, community leaders and public and private institutions -- including UH campuses.

To dismiss underage drinking as a manifestation of the "plain exuberance of youth" is to ignore the facts.

Alcohol is the No. 1 drug of choice for Hawaii teens. It's an entry-level or "gateway" drug that often leads to abuse of other substances such as marijuana or crystal methamphetamine. Underage drinking has also been associated with poor academic performance, violence, suicide, risky sexual activities, victimization and other problem

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behaviors.

Scientific research shows that when people do not drink before the age of 21, they have a 70 percent chance of not becoming dependent on or addicted to alcohol.

In light of these facts, our administration is encouraging UH President David McClain and the Board of Regents to take effective measures to reduce underage drinking on its campuses. This includes banning alcohol-related advertising and sponsorship of athletic events. This proposal is not unique to UH. It's part of a national movement to prevent alcohol from being associated with collegiate sports.

Moreover, this is not a movement toward "prohibition," as Singh contends. This is a recognition that the majority of UH undergraduates are not of legal drinking age, and that alcohol abuse should not be trivialized or glamorized.

We must recognize that reducing underage drinking is a difficult proposition. According to a 2004 report in the Journal of Public Health Policy, there are three major obstacles in the way.

» The alcohol industry has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Underage drinkers in the United States consumed about 2 percent of alcohol sold in 1999, accounting for roughly \$22.5 billion in sales.

» Many adults used alcohol when they were younger. These individuals may not be convinced that underage drinking is harmful, regarding it instead as a normal "rite of passage."

» Some policies restricting underage drinking also impede access to alcohol by adults, as is the case with banning bars on campuses. In such instances, adults often waver in their support for drinking restrictions.

Our administration believes the best approach is mirroring a strategy adopted in anti-smoking campaigns. A generation ago, smoking a cigarette in public was as commonplace as eating ice cream or hotdogs. Due to research and effective media campaigns, however, our society drastically changed its attitudes about tobacco. Now it's time to change our attitudes about underage drinking. "Changing Attitudes" and "Changing Lives" is the cornerstone of the Lingle-Aiona Drug Plan.

Rather than hypothesizing that a campus bar "actually serves to teach students how to be mature and responsible," as Singh suggests, we should be working together to encourage healthier lifestyles and safer communities. Such support from UH faculty, students and staff would set a powerful example for the rest of the

state and for universities across the country.

Banning alcohol on campus may require some sacrifice of convenience for those over 21. However, it is a small price to pay if it helps reduce the serious consequences associated with substance abuse.

James R. "Duke" Aiona Jr. is the lieutenant governor of the state of Hawaii.

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